UNITED NATIONS

World Chronicle

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GUEST: **C.V. NARASIMHAN**
Senior Consultant to the United Nations University

JOURNALISTS: Ian Williams, *The New York Observer*
Afsane Bassir Pour, *Le Monde*

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY

In his recently published *History of the United Nations University*, C.V. NARASIMHAN, Senior Consultant to the University, discusses an historical account of this institution as well as the nature of its work. The University is not a regular one, with students and faculty: it is designed to operate as a network with its own research and training centres and programmes. The University also works in close cooperation with other academic and research institutions and organizations to help better understand the nature, dynamics, and complexity of global problems in order to develop more coherent policy options for political and practical solutions.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Two decades ago, the international community established a major institution, the United Nations University, or UNU. Seated in Tokyo, Japan, the University devotes its work to research on the pressing global problems of human survival, development and welfare, as well as the maintenance of peace and security.

Our guest today, who served in various capacities as Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations for more than two decades, is the author of a recently published book on the history of the United Nations University. He is C.V. Narasimhan, now Senior Consultant to the University.

Joining me to talk with Mr. Narasimhan are Ian Williams of *The New York Observer* and Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde*. Mr. Narasimhan, welcome to World Chronicle.

Mr. Under-Secretary-General -- I guess one can still call you that, once you have the title, you're entitled to keep it -- the Council of the University recently held its meeting in Accra, Ghana, for the first time in Africa, and I have a picture here of the gathering. What is the significance of the first meeting in Africa, and what does it mean to relations between the University and the continent of Africa?

NARASIMHAN: Well, the governing Council, as you know, consists of 24 members, and the governing Council is the body that sets the policies and priorities of the United Nations University. And for quite some time work has been in progress to establish an Institute for Natural Resources in Africa. As you know, every UN activity has an acronym, and the acronym for this is INRA. And the headquarters of this INRA is going to be in Accra, Ghana. We are all aware, of course, that the natural resources of Africa are practically unlimited, and we have not even scratched the surface of what is available there for the benefit of the people of the Africa. So this proposal is to establish an institution which would highlight the immediate possibilities, the medium-term possibilities, and the long-term possibilities for developing the natural resources of Africa for the benefit of the people of Africa. This meeting was held in November and December 1994 with that purpose in mind, and it was a very successful meeting.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Narasimhan, I think not too many people are very familiar with the United Nations University, which is perhaps a pity. What is it they say, that success has many fathers and failure is an orphan? And in 1969 there were many fathers who got together in a way to produce the UN University. And in reading your book, I noticed that Earl Mountbatten of Burma, the former Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Southeast

Asia in World War Two, actually came up with the idea that was finally embraced by U Thant, the Secretary-General, and developed into the UN University. Can you tell us a bit about that?

NARASIMHAN: Yes. Not quite the way you mentioned it, Mike. What happened was, for quite some time before that, Mountbatten had been promoting the idea of what was called United World Colleges. There were a number of them already by then, and the object of United World Colleges was to bring people from all parts of the world together, under one roof, and for them to rub shoulders with each other and to get to understand each other's culture, and to have greater tolerance and respect for each other's culture.

Now, U Thant, of course, being Burmese himself, was very much taken up with Lord Mountbatten. And at this luncheon that U Thant had for Lord Mountbatten, Mountbatten expounded this idea, and U Thant thought something on the same lines should be done by way of an international university to be established under the aegis of the United Nations. That was the starting point of the idea. That's why I say U Thant was the father of the idea, but with all due respect I might say I was the midwife, because between 1969 and 1974, a pretty long period of gestation, the United Nations University took a somewhat different shape. And as you recall just what the Charter says, the object of the United Nations University is to provide academic input towards solving global problems, pressing global problems of human survival, development and welfare. That's how it was established. And fortunately for us, the Government of Japan, even in the very beginning, offered to provide the host facilities for the University and also to make a very substantial contribution of $100 million to start with on a matching basis for an endowment fund. And that's how it was located in Japan, in Tokyo. And that's where it is now.

WILLIAMS: But I mean, it's a long way if Earl Mountbatten's original idea was colleges for educating young people. This is clearly not a university for young men or for young women. I've never met a graduate of the United Nations University. It's not a university in the sense that most of us.... It doesn't educate people as individuals. Could you explain where are all the students for this university?

NARASIMHAN: You are absolutely right. You see, as I said, the object of the University was to provide academic input, so to speak, towards solving these problems.

WILLIAMS: It's more of a think tank than a university, in some ways.

NARASIMHAN: Yes, it's more a think tank. But the intention was that the University should have a corps of scholars in headquarters, or what you might call the equivalent of a faculty, and training facilities distributed the world over networking with established institutions and also starting new institutions to deal with particular aspects of development. -- of which, of course, one of the best is WIDER, the World Institution for Development Economic Research, which has been very active in Helsinki, Finland for the last 10 years. So it is not a university in

the accepted sense of the word because it does not have a faculty. One might say one advantage of not having a faculty is, you know, the old saying, old deans never die, they only lose their faculties.

BASSIR POUR: Well then, it shouldn't be called a university; it's misleading, as Michael said. Not only are people not familiar with it, most people haven't even heard of United Nations University. Maybe the name "university" should be rethought. But going back to what you were saying to Ian about this being sort of a think tank, the major problem the UN is facing right now is peace-keeping, and reflection is going on around the world about what should be done about peace-keeping. Is there anything coming out of this University, any kind of studies that would be useful right now?

NARASIMHAN: The United Nations University has started a programme, in fact, on the suggestion of the present Secretary-General, Agenda for Peace. And that will involve all aspects of peace-keeping, peace-making, and all the other aspects of peace in our times. As you know, the trouble spots of the world will always be there, and each trouble spot has to have its own tailor-made approach to it. And the United Nations University is devoting its attention to this. But meanwhile, of course, what it has been doing is: One, I mentioned WIDER; another is the Institute for New Technologies in the field of industrial development; the third is the best way in which you can apply software, the latest technologies of software, for solving global problems, and that's a new institution which has been established in Macao. Now Macao will eventually become part of China, but right now it is jointly sponsored by both China and Portugal. And INRA, this Natural Resources Institute in Africa I mentioned just now. So it goes on like that.

But peace is priority number one. And the United Nations University is devoting a lot of attention to it. They have had more than one meeting of panellists to discuss this matter and to chart out a programme, an agenda, for this particular study. And it will be making some progress and making some contributions in the next couple of years.

BASSIR POUR: And some noise. Maybe we'll hear about what they're doing.

NARASIMHAN: Yes. Of course, you'll know. But one point you made is absolutely right: the United Nations University lacks visibility, both in academic circles and in the United Nations system. In the United Nations system, we all know about the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, UNESCO and so on. It does not figure in that area. Also, in academic circles it is not very well known because, as you pointed out, it is perhaps a misnomer to call it UNU. But I think it's probably too late to make a change. The General Assembly decided in its wisdom to call it a university, and a university can be many things to many people. It can also be, for all practical purposes, an institution which funds and sponsors studies on various aspects of human problems. So perhaps what we have to

do is programmes like the present one, chaired by my good friend Mike Littlejohns and with distinguished panellists like you joining. Perhaps we should do more to put the UN University on the map, so to speak, so that people understand that it's a group of very serious people who are doing their very best to assist in solving these global problems. No one has found one solution for them, but a multifaceted approach is required.

Take WIDER, for example. You remember the conference in Rio on environment problems a couple of years ago? Much of the work regarding mountain ecology, that is, when you've got mountains, you can tear down the trees and have an ecological disaster, but at the same time, with proper field development they can be a very useful source of support for people, life support for people. How can you reconcile the two conflicting interests of people and ecology? They made a study on that, and it was a very important input to this Rio Conference and was extremely well received. So on and so forth. In other words, no one is going to find a simple solution for these problems, including peace-keeping and peace-making, but the UNU will make its own contribution to these problems.

LITTLEJOHNS: WIDER, the acronym, I forget what the --

NARASIMHAN: World Institution for Development Economic Research. In Helsinki.

LITTLEJOHNS: Why did you pick Helsinki for it?

NARASIMHAN: Well, you see, the choice of the host government is based upon the willingness of governments to provide host facilities, which means they take care of the local expenses, providing a headquarters building, taking care of the local requirements of whatever it is, running the place, and so on. That's how we chose Tokyo. Not only has the Government of Japan given this $100 million, they have built a brand new building, you see, into which the United Nations University moved in 1993. And they are also taking care of part of the expenses of running the institution there, like, for example, the cost of telephones, the cost of electricity, all kinds of things like that. So when a government offers host facilities -- in the case of WIDER, Helsinki -- we are glad to accept that facility. The Institute for New Technologies is in a place which was probably very unfamiliar until recently: Maastricht, in the Netherlands. There again, the Government of the Netherlands has provided -- not only the Government of the Netherlands, but the local authorities as well. In the case of Tokyo too. The land on which this building stands is 100 times the cost of the building, because land values are so high there. That has been made available from the metropolitan government of Tokyo to the United Nations University.

WILLIAMS: Taking a cynic's eye view -- very uncommon of me, I know -- but taking a cynic's eye view of this, you could say that the Japanese wanted a UN institution, and the rest of the UN thought that the Japanese were of a size now that they deserved a UN institution. And then in Helsinki, I think we had Martti Ahtisaari, who had ambitions for the Secretary-

Generalship at the time, and was instrumental in making sure that WIDER was placed in Helsinki, I think. And --

LITTLEJOHNS: Although he is now the President of Finland.

WILLIAMS: Yes, well, I think he'll be back; I think he'll be back with his application for next time the Secretary-General's job comes. But apart from that, I mean, when you look at it, you say it's not very visible, but here we have $2 billion worth of real estate right in the centre of Tokyo for essentially the headquarters of a global think tank. If you're going to be cynical, $2 billion, I mean, what could you do for primary education in India or China with $2 billion?

NARASIMHAN: The $2 billion, that's only a loan, you see, it's not -- the land belongs to the metropolitan Tokyo government, there's no question about that. The building is built on that land by the Government of Japan. And this is the headquarters for the United Nations University because part of the headquarters agreement was that the Government of Japan would provide a headquarters building.

WILLIAMS: Oh, I appreciate that. But it just seems a disproportionate allocation of resources.

NARASIMHAN: But I don't know that you're quite right in saying the reason for putting it in Tokyo was just because the Government of Japan wanted a United Nations presence there. They could have opted for something else. But they've had an interest --

WILLIAMS: For example, the Deputy Director, Mr. Muller, ended up sponsoring a University for Peace in Costa Rica, which looks like another form of pork barrelling with paying off of friends. Is there any connection between these two institutions?

NARASIMHAN: I don't think so. Because here, in the case of United Nations University the commitment of Japan was a very serious commitment. It was not just to the presence of the United Nations, they could have thought of something else. But they wanted the University, a place of learning and so on. And now there are proposals to establish an institution for study of, for example, the application of modern technology to newly emerging, developing governments, to be part of the UN system of institutions, to be established in Tokyo. They are taking their responsibilities very seriously. I do not want to say anything about my dear friend Martti, because I heard just about two years ago, maybe a little more, I was scheduled to have a meeting with him, and I think that he will make a very, very good -- he has been already a very good president, I think. But the story I wanted to tell you, going back to that occasion is, Helvi Sipila was the first woman to be appointed Assistant Secretary-General in the United Nations.

LITTLEJOHNS: From Finland also.

NARASIMHAN: From Finland. And I had some responsibility for that appointment because at that time I was advising Kurt Waldheim on his appointments. When she retired from the United Nations, like Martti, she had presidential ambitions. She's a very fair, blond lady, you know, and her opponent in the course of all this was always saying, "She has no political experience, she's a dark horse. She has no political experience." And she said to him, "For heaven's sake, don't call me a dark horse. If you must, call me your fair mare."

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle, our guest is C.V. Narasimhan, Senior Consultant to the United Nations University. Afsane Bassir Pour?

BASSIR POUR: Yes, Mr. Narasimhan, with all due respect, I mean, if you're trying to sell the idea of United Nations University to the people, give us the ABCs of this institution. What is it? What language, for example, is used there? It's supposed to be global, so I imagine there are many languages. What kind of conditions are there for admission, for people who want to study there, work there? What's the budget? Just the basic ABCs of the place.

NARASIMHAN: Well, as I mentioned to you, the language used is basically English, for all the research and training programmes and so on. For example, we are in Helsinki, but we still use English; the same with Maastricht. Now, supposing, for example, for the sake of argument, you would have an institution like that in France, there is absolutely no reason why French should not be the language of that institution. There is no restriction on what language can be used. And I'm quite willing to believe that if an institution sponsored by Japan were to be part of the United Nations complex, the United Nations University complex, I'm sure they would want to use Japanese. Because the object is to get across to Japanese, you see, not to follow a world-wide audience. So it depends upon the target audience, also. And the publication programmes of the University, what's called -- there's a chapter on that, you see -- they use all languages. They use every language, and this bibliography is available wherever our periodicals are published, and so on. So, the language is not a problem, but more often than not it is English, you see.

Now, the think tank approach is valuable in many ways because very often people who are in the thick of a problem don't have the time to sit back and say, "Now, can this problem be approached in a different way? Can we see some way of getting out of this?" Now, let us take a situation like Cyprus. In March 1964, the Cyprus operation was sanctioned for three months. There is a reason for that. Because at that time our friends in the Soviet Union had discovered if you authorize a peace-keeping operation without a time limit, it cannot be closed down without the affirmative vote of the five permanent members, or at least without a negative vote from a permanent member. For example, if they had wanted to close down the Congo operation, they could not have done that, because the Congo operation was sanctioned by the Security Council without a time limit. So in 1964 they had learned their lesson and they

said it's for three months. It has come up 60 times since then for extension, and it's still going strong. Now, what is the solution to the problem? If the solution could have been found by human ingenuity on the part of friends in -- our Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, they would have found this answer by then. Maybe a third person could make a contribution which has not occurred to either of them, some formula, some remedy, some logistics problem, some solution along the lines of freedom of movement, but having this limitation, that limitation, things like that.

BASSIR POUR: Well, have they? Have they got any solution to any problem?

NARASIMHAN: No, not yet, but there is no reason why someone else should not find a solution, because the people there have not been able to find it. And, for that matter, the Secretary-General, successive Secretaries-General have been seized of this Cyprus problem as a priority. Kurt Waldheim devoted a lot of time to that, but he could not find an answer. So maybe a third party, a think tank, could produce a solution. I'm only saying it's a possibility. But you must recognize that no one else has found a solution to this problem.

BASSIR POUR: Are they working on it? Are they working on --

NARASIMHAN: Yes, that's one of the reasons they're there, for peace, exactly.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Narasimhan, tell us, give us a few examples of the achievements of UNU: What comes to mind, what comes to your mind?

NARASIMHAN: Well, as I told you, the concept of the founding fathers was really to have a whole series of affiliated institutions, and to the best of my knowledge, the University is now proceeding more on those lines, which is more in line with the thinking of the founding fathers -- a decentralized university structure with institutions spread over the whole world, devoting their attention to one particular problem, not a global problem, but a particular problem. Now, so far as particular successes are concerned, you must permit me to make a reference to what has been written recently about the University, because that's rather important, you see. Now, the --

LITTLEJOHNS: This is a report on the University?

NARASIMHAN: Yes. For example, you see, very recently they have created a map showing the hazards of the Asian highlands. The object of this is controlling floods. And this has already had an effect in Bangladesh. They are better aware of what they need to do to control the flooding of Bangladesh on account of the flooding of the major rivers, Brahmaputra and so on, that flow through there. That's just one example, you see? In the fields of geophysiology and intergenerational legal principles they have produced some 320 books and foreign international journals, and so on. I mean, if you want specifics, I can get a lot of literature in your hands, you see. But the object is -- I'm just giving you instances -- the object

is to have an input which is not available at the present time from other sources and make that contribution to solving a particular problem. That's how it has been developed.

WILLIAMS: One of the things we've noticed about the United Nations -- especially those of us on the press floor -- is that as you walk through there are whole mountains of reports filed on almost every subject. One of the problems is whether anyone actually reads and acts upon them. And I notice that the publishing institute of the United Nations University is running a sort of fairly large deficit. I was wondering if you thought that there's any chance that the wealth of wisdom that's being accumulated there will be dispersed on a wider scale. I did see the stand at the Frankfurt Book Fair late last year, but I must confess it wasn't one of the most thronged stands at the Book Fair.

NARASIMHAN: Yes. Well, I only hope that my publication does not add to the deficit of the United Nations University.

LITTLEJOHNS: Surely not. Surely not, Mr. Narasimhan.

NARASIMHAN: And if it does, I think it's in a very worthy cause, if I may say so, because the object of this exercise is to make the United Nations University better known and better understood, you see. Its limitations, what it can do and what it cannot do, and so on. Just as the United Nations. People expect a lot of the United Nations, much of it based upon an old estimation of what the United Nations can legally do. In the case of the United Nations University, there are also some limitations like that. But the publications programme is a very important part of the United Nations University, and it does not need to be self-sufficient. On the other hand, they will do everything possible to make these books and publications available to a larger public -- so that this book, for example, will hopefully reach a wider audience, which will then be able to see what the United Nations is trying to do. This kind of effort. I think the publications section of the United Nations University should make a special effort to make this better known and better understood. I would agree with you there. But the budgetary problem is not, in my judgement, the most important consideration.

BASSIR POUR: Speaking candidly now, would you say after 20 years that the University is a success, or a failure?

NARASIMHAN: The University is getting along well. It is approaching a point where it will be deemed a success in the years to come. So far, all I can say is it has come a long way from 1974-75. Because the first five years, under Hester, it was a programme approach.

LITTLEJOHNS: The American Rector.

NARASIMHAN: James Hester, yes. The first Rector. Then in the Soedjatmoko term, again it was kind of medium-term perspective planning and things like that. Now we are getting very close to the original ideas of the founding fathers. And I think before long the contributions that the University could make will become very well known. Because one

success is all you need, you see. One success, one very publicized success is all you need to put the UN University on the map. And I think, for example, this Institute in Africa could be precisely that. Supposing, for example, they're able to find one very important resource -- it could be a metal resource, for example -- and how that can be exploited with full benefit to the people without any ecological problems, or something like that -- that would make a lot of difference in the long run, what the United Nations University can do. That's why I attach so much importance towards what's being done in Africa.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Narasimhan, in your book you refer to the involvement of a number of Nobel laureates. What have they been doing?

NARASIMHAN: Well, they have actually been members of the Council of the United Nations University. In the case of Nevin Scrimshaw, who won the World Food Prize, he has been very heavily involved in the problems of human nutrition.

WILLIAMS: Did any of them get these Nobel Prizes for work done at the University?

NARASIMHAN: No. No. That would be --

LITTLEJOHNS: That's something for the future.

NARASIMHAN: -- that would be absolutely outside. They did their work, they were Nobelists when they came there. Abdel Salam, for example, he did his work in the field of theoretical physics, but not at the University. But he was a member of the honour roll, so to speak, of the governing Council of the United Nations University. When we choose the governing Council members -- I am trying to say that they have chosen people of the highest quality in the academic field. That's all that that list of Nobel laureates goes to show. These are not just professors and academics picked at random, these are all people of great distinction whom we have tried to put on the governing Council of the University.

LITTLEJOHNS: The current Rector is from Brazil, I believe. How was he elected, chosen, or whatever?

NARASIMHAN: The procedure for selecting the Rector is: First of all, there is a nominating committee of the governing Council. The governing Council invites applications -- actually, it makes it known that it's looking for a Rector. And then they discuss it amongst themselves. And then there is a small nominating committee made up of five members of the governing Council, and they submit a panel of no more than three names to the two appointing authorities, who are the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Director-General of UNESCO. And these two make up their minds whom they wish to appoint. That's how the present Rector was chosen, and he was also reappointed for a five-year term ending in, I think, 1996.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Narasimhan, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of World Chronicle. Our guest has been C.V. Narasimhan, Senior

Consultant to the United Nations University. He was interviewed by Ian Williams of *The New York Observer* and Afsane Bassir Pour of Le Monde.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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